

Listening is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project

Edited by Dave Isay

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Reviewed by:

Amanda McCarthy (aamccarthy@gmail.com), Coordinator of New Student and Parent Programs, Case Western Reserve University

In 1970, American folklorist Alan Lomax stated: “The essence of America lies not in the headlined heroes... but in the everyday folks who live and die unknown, yet leave their dreams as legacies.” This quote encapsulates the essence of *Listening is an Act of Love*, a compilation of compelling interviews excerpted from StoryCorps, a non-profit organization whose mission is to preserve the rich and diverse history of America through personal oral accounts.

StoryCorps began recording interviews in 2003 and, at present, has gathered and archived more than 30,000 interviews involving more than 60,000 participants. One copy of each recording is given to the participants, and another is preserved at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. At its core, StoryCorps is a dialogue between two people of significance to one another. Participants of all ages, races, creeds, and economic backgrounds share stories of hope, humor, struggle, loss, and everything in between. Select StoryCorps interviews are broadcast on National Public Radio’s (NPR) Morning Edition, available on StoryCorps’ website, and compiled in *Listening is an Act of Love*.

The book begins with an introduction of the StoryCorps concept before moving into its five thematic chapters: Home and Family, Work and Dedication, Journeys, History and Struggle, and Fire and Water.

“Home and Family” chronicles dialogues between a grandparent and grandchild, two sisters, a father and daughter, spouses, and friends. Participants speak of childhood memories, love and affection, and familial relationships. Although each interview transcription is unique, one example from this particular chapter involves an adopted young man interviewing his birth mother after meeting her only a few years earlier. The birth mother explains the painful decision to place her son for adoption. As he listens to her story, he asks a poignant final question: “So, knowing what you know now, would you do it again?” The birth mother admits “no,” and the reader can detect that a sense of understanding and closure has developed during their heart-to-heart conversation.

“Work and Dedication” showcases conversations between siblings, spouses, friends, parents, and children, who explain how important lessons learned on-the-job affected the rest of their lives. Again, although each interview remains unique, an example from this chapter involves a middle-aged bus driver interviewed about his job by a StoryCorps facilitator. The bus driver recalls a day when an elderly woman stepped onto his bus, seemingly completely lost. She intended to meet her friends at a restaurant but could not remember which restaurant specifically. The bus driver instructed her to sit in the front of the bus, reassuring her that he would stop at each and every restaurant until she found her friends. He did just that and ultimately led her by the arm, uniting her with her friends at the proper restaurant. Before she disembarked, the elderly woman told the bus driver that she had recently been diagnosed with cancer but regardless of her situation, on this day, he made her feel like Cinderella.

“Journeys” is a particularly poignant portion of the book that discusses stories of pain and struggle. Although the subject matter of the book shifts from happy reminiscences to gripping tales of addiction, grief, loneliness, mental illness, infidelity, terminal illness, and death, this chapter

is inspiring and offers many instances of people who have essentially triumphed over tragedy. One such example in this chapter involves a woman who survived the United Airlines flight 232 plane crash in Sioux City, Iowa in 1989. The woman discloses her anguished recollections of the plane crash and the healing process that followed. Through her experiences, the woman imparts a distinct sense of wisdom about living each day to its fullest.

Similarly, “History and Struggles” presents a series of interviews that examine war, the Holocaust, immigration, racism, and AIDS. One interview involves a 12-year-old grandson interviewing his elderly grandfather who joined the Navy at age 15 during World War II. The young boy pointedly asks his grandfather, “What was the saddest moment in your life?” The grandfather explains that, while stationed in Norfolk, Virginia during his early days in the Navy, he decided to visit Washington, DC for the day. He spent the entire day exploring monuments and decided to end his evening watching a picture at the local movie house. However, the ticket person refused to sell him a ticket because he was an African American. This man’s saddest moment was the realization that he was a good enough man to fight for his country, but not good enough to sit in a theater and watch a movie.

The final chapter, “Fire and Ice,” includes interviews recorded at a permanent StoryCorps site at Ground Zero in New York City and at mobile sites stationed in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Although each interview is unique, a general theme of pure heartache is present.

While the above overview gives a glimpse into the book’s content, it is impossible to properly relate the emotional rollercoaster that is in store for the reader. Because the text is transcribed rather than written, the reader can truly understand who the “authors” are and why the stories they tell are so important. The format of the books makes it easy for the reader to relate to each interview, and it is impossible not to become engrossed in the stories of these individuals and share in their diverse experiences.

Listening is an Act of Love, with its litany of themes, relatable topics, and well-known historical backdrops, would make an excellent selection for a new student reading program. Whereas some common reading texts are specific to a region, time period, or dramatic theme, this selection addresses the following topics and more: family, relationships, struggles and hardships, self-discovery, loss, love, hard work and success, dedication and commitment.

With such a wide array of subjects, readers are certain to make at least one connection to a place, person, experience, or topic. Furthermore, with 293 pages, it is manageable in terms of length and readability. Each interview averages from two to ten pages. The overall length, coupled with the frequently changing subject matter, makes this selection a relatively quick read that many students will have difficulty putting down.

A successful new student reading selection not only connects students to the book but also helps to connect the book to students’ curricular and co-curricular activities. Because of the breadth of subject matter, this book can be used across disciplines in history, English, composition, humanities, and sociology courses, as well as in campus-wide co-curricular activities. The editor provides resources that include interview instructions, interview checklist, and a listing of favorite StoryCorps questions which would be helpful in encouraging members of the campus community to conduct their own interviews. The following are a few examples of how this selection could be used in curricular and co-curricular activities:

- **Construct a campus listening booth.** Encourage students, faculty, and staff to conduct interviews. Just like StoryCorps and NPR, campus radio could broadcast these interviews.
- **StoryCorps Speaker.** Invite a member of the StoryCorps team to your campus to talk about the purpose and significance of this project and the importance of listening and learning from one another.
- **Student Summer Interview Project.** Following summer orientation and before welcome

week activities, encourage students to conduct an interview with an important person in their lives. The interview can be conducted using the resources available in the book. If possible, the student should record the interview and then complete a reflection exercise on the overall experience. The project and reflections can be discussed within small groups during welcome week activities, in class, or even within the residence halls.

A successful new student reading program not only offers connections between curricular and co-curricular events but also strives to unite the campus community through a common reading experience. With a format akin to a compendium of short stories and relatable subject matter, this selection holds appeal to first-year students, upper-division students, faculty, and staff.

At its core, *Listening is an Act of Love* is about sharing experiences and learning from one another, and, as a result, learning about oneself. The first year of college for any student is about learning and self-discovery. New student reading programs not only help students bond through a common reading experience, but they also serve to engage students in learning more about their current transition. The participants depicted in this book connect with one another through story-telling and listening. Their individual stories connect the reader to their lives wrought with happiness, sorrow, achievement, and understanding. And it is through these stories that a reader is reminded of the rich history of the American landscape and how our similarities and understanding of differences bond us together.